DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 089 385 CS 500 648

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TITLE Children and Television Violence.
INSTITUTION Massachusetts Speech Association.; Massachusetts Univ., Amherst. Dept. of Communication Studies.
PUB DATE Dec 73
NOTE 15p.
JOURNAL CIT Department of Speech--Educational Services Report; v5 n2 p17-30 December 1973

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Aggression; Anti Social Behavior; Behavioral Science Research; Child Development; Childhood Attitudes; Child Psychology; *Children; *Programing (Broadcast); *Television; *Violence

ABSTRACT

The question of whether violence depicted on television causes viewers to act aggressively is meaningless because it implies a simple "yes" or "no" response. Effects of mass media depend on the types of viewers and content as well as the conditions of message reception. Television violence can affect the behavior of children on some occasions. Studies of media violence have revealed one or more of three general effects. First, children can learn violent acts through observation but will or will not tend to imitate them depending on whether the violent acts are perceived as rewarding or not. Second, media content can increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior by the viewer if he is predisposed to aggression by feelings of anger toward another person. Finally, however, the viewing of violence can reduce the likelihood of aggressive behavior if the content provides some form of catharsis for the angered viewer or if it does not provide positive reinforcement for aggressive action. The proportion of children affected by television violence has yet to be determined, but such program content seems to be doing far more harm than good. (RN)

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The Department of Speech--Educational Services

REPORT

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CS 500 645

CHILDREN AND TELEVISION VIOLENCE

by

Timothy P. Meyer*

Because so many children watch so much television, the question of how program content affects viewers, especially children, has been asked repeatedly since television rapidly began to diffuse throughout America in the early 1950's. A number of books and countless research articles have dealt with the work of social scientists and their efforts to identify and measure the dimensions of television's impact. Several Congressional inquiries have sought to assess the relationship between television violence and juvenile delinquency and anti-social aggression. The single question which is asked over and over again, apparently still not satisfactorily answered: Does violence on television cause viewers to act violently? The purpose of this article is to try and come to grips with this question by describing what we know and do not know about the effects of television violence on children. This discussion will be limited to children, although many of the findings are equally applicable to adolescents and adults as well.

VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION: PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

Like many other behavioral concepts (i.e., attitude, value, etc.), "violence" has been difficult to define. In some instances, violence is equated with aggression; in others, researchers draw careful distinctions between the two. Most researchers do agree, however, that violence involves the purposive act or intent to inflict harm, injury, or death on another person. In some cases, this definition includes a verbal as well as physical dimension, indicating that purposely inflicting psychological harm through verbal attacks constitutes violent behavior in the same way as physical attacks. Violence is seen as a form of aggression--destructive

aggression. This distinction may help to clarify other behaviors of people, such as exploring and mastering the environment or overcoming frustration, which are also referred to as aggressive. When aggression is purposely destructive, this behavior is then referred to as violence.

A PERSPECTIVE ON HOW THE MASS MEDIA AFFECT BEHAVIOR

Before describing the impact of televised violence on behavior, a brief overview of mass media effects is essential to a clear understanding of what the results of violence studies mean. As influencing agents, the mass media function amid other forces in society (i.e., peers, parents, religion, schools, etc.). Moreover, each mass media institution functions amid other media institutions. Consequently, the mass media institutions represent only one of many potential factors which can combine to produce a given behavioral effect. Further, the overlap of functions between the media (e.g., a newspaper, TV, radio, and news magazines all report common news items) makes it difficult to single out or pinpoint one mass medium as a single source of influence. As a result of these two conditions, it has been difficult to accurately measure the impact of the media or medium. At best, we can successfully identify the media or a single medium as a contributing cause but rarely as the sole cause of a given effect.

The mass media audience itself also confounds the measurement and identification of mass media content effects. Early mass media research attempted to generalize the effects of certain types of content on the total mass audience. It was soon discovered, however, that such generalizations were inadequate, and that media effects were manifested in different ways for different people. Thus, ANY GIVEN EFFECT OF THE MASS MEDIA DEPENDS ON WHAT TYPE OF CONTENT PRODUCES WHAT KINDS OF EFFECTS ON WHAT KINDS OF PEOPLE UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS. Obviously, no one should, therefore, expect the

media to have uniform effects on the mass audience, given the complex interaction of content, conditions, and audience differences.

To illustrate the significance of the media effects measurement problem, we can examine the method of trying to identify the average amount of time spent by the mass audience in viewing television. Such a problem may appear relatively simple on the surface, but a closer look shows the complexity related to identify just one behavioral effect produced by television. Trying to describe how much the average person views television per day is a most unrewarding task because "averages" of this sort are of little or no actual value as descriptions of human behavior. Certain individuals (i.e., many of the urban poor) in the mass audience watch far more television than the overall average, while others (i.e., college educated viewers) watch considerably less. Further, there is a great difference in what programs certain individuals (i.e., males versus females, children versus those over 50 years of age, etc.) watch and do not watch. Thus, it is far more useful to describe how many of what types of people watch what types of programs at what times and how often.

The major point of this overview of media effects is that uniform effects of the media on the audience can rarely be identified. We must, therefore, talk about media effects in terms of what kinds of content produce what types of effects on what kinds of people under what conditions. This perspective must be kept in mind especially when one is tempted to pass value judgments on any behavioral effect (i.e., the effects of violent TV content), while for others under those same conditions or, perhaps, the same people under other conditions. the effect may either be negligible or even beneficial.

VIOLENT/AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Like most of our behavior, aggression is a complex activity; many factors in the environment

affect the occurrence of aggression and the form that it takes. An attempt to aggress against a target may be thwarted by others who threaten an aggressive act of their own, or by other important variables such as the relative power of the target, laws which carry severe consequences for violators, the chances of being successful, the way in which aggressive responses are valued by the individual, and so forth.

The likelihood of aggressive responses -- both positive and negative -- develops from experience, either through direct participation or by observing others involved in aggressive activities. The role played by the mass media becomes important in the latter case. Witnessing the negative consequences of aggression, for example, such as those displayed in films like "Straw Dogs," "Dirty Harry," or the "Wild Bunch," may be more than sufficient to inhibit subsequent aggression for many viewers, since the viewer's expectation for reward (positive reinforcement) is lowered. The angered individual may subsequently be satisfied (successfully reinforced) with an alternate means of behaving. Conversely, observation of rewarded violence may increase the likelihood of reward, and thus may encourage violence for some viewers.

CHILDREN AND TELEVISION VIOLENCE: WHAT WE KNOW

Media violence studies have demonstrated one or more of three general effects: (1) imitative effects through observational learning; (2) increased aggression as a result of viewing certain types of media violence; (3) decreased aggression as a consequence of viewing certain kinds of violence. Each of these areas will be considered in more detail.

Imitative Effects - Observational Learning:

The impact of television on learning or acquiring behavioral responses is reasonably well

documented (see the references at the end of this article). Research has demonstrated that through the process of observational learning, children add responses to their available repertoires. Research has also shown that some types of television content also alter existing response hierarchies by elevating certain responses as a result of vicarious reinforcement (observed rewards or punishment experienced by TV characters). For example, the viewer who sees the television character using violence under seemingly justified conditions, and being positively reinforced or rewarded, may well generalize such conditions to govern his behavior in his own environment. On the opposite side, the viewer who sees a character using violence to achieve his ends and being punished for his actions may be less likely to imitate or to generalize violent responses observed under these conditions to his own environment. The active imitation of TV violence, then, is influenced by the perceived conditions of reinforcement accompanying the violent media acts. These conditions affect the position (high or low) that the response will occupy in the hierarchy. In brief, vicarious reinforcement influences the likelihood of the response produced by a viewer under certain conditions.

One of the more unexpected results of past research was the finding that children acquired (learned) the observed behavioral responses regardless of the direction of the reinforcement provided by the TV characters. Even children who saw an aggressive TV character punished for his behavior were able to display the character's responses when offered the appropriate incentives. This result suggests that acquiring responses occurs independently of the conditions essential to displaying those responses. The TV display of a given behavior may be acquired by children independently of the depicted circumstances, and subsequently used by a child who encounters conditions in his environment which allow aggression. Under those conditions, only the media-displayed

response has relevance, while the motivations or consequences may be largely irrelevant. The continued acquisition of these kinds of responses may help to predispose children to violence by adding responses to their behavioral hierarchy or repertoire, which, in turn, reduce the likelihood of non-violent responses.

To summarize, the basic effects of TV violence are as follows: 1) Children learn aggressive behavior provided by TV content -- they can and do add responses to their behavioral hierarchies, regardless of the presented reinforcement results. 2) When the violent TV content is perceived by children as rewarding, vicarious reinforcement can affect the position of the response in the hierarchy, and raise the probability of its being evoked. 3) If the viewer sees that the circumstances in his own environment are similar to the conditions where TV violence was unsuccessful, the probability of this response being evoked is lowered.

It is important to remember that the conditions of reinforcement presented are not necessarily those perceived. Simply following a violent act by an activity commonly defined as punishment does not guarantee a reduced probability of the response being learned and stored for use under certain conditions in the future. Punishment must be perceived as punishment and as a necessary result of the violent act. Media violence is often momentarily successful, but subsequently fails due to changing conditions. Should the viewer perceive the short-term success and ignore (or hope to change) the long-term failure, the "punished" behavior will be perceived as rewarding. Remember, children do not always perceive events as adults do; in fact, there is usually a considerable difference between child and adult perceptions.

Increased Aggression:

Whether media-depicted violence serves to increase, decrease, or have no effect on the

probability of subsequent viewer aggression depends on the concurrent operation of content, conditional, and audience variables. Each of these interacting variables is characterized by differing degrees of intensity and duration. The type of combination formed, and the degree of intensity and duration of the elements are the determinants of the specific impact that media violence will have on behavior in a given instance. Research investigating the effects of media violence on behavior has helped to identify some of these combinations which affect the level of viewer aggression.

One combination involving media which increases the probability of aggressive behavior, includes the following components: 1) an angered viewer -- a person who is angered by an instigator who, in turn, is available as a specific target of aggression for the viewer to attack; 2) the viewing of portrayed, justified violence (i.e., a violent act committed by a television character in which the target or victim "deserves" the violent punishment he receives), with cue properties appropriate to the transfer of the media-presented action to the actual environment; 3) conditions in the viewer's environment which make possible aggressive action toward the target; and 4) the viewer's perception of positive results from the violent act. For these components to interact with the greatest effect, the timing and order of their occurrence must be rather exact.

Research in this area has suggested the following sequence: An individual is angered by another. In this aroused state, the individual views violent behavior, which he interprets as justified, and which is sufficiently similar to his present circumstances that generalization can occur. Subsequent to the viewing, the individual finds himself in circumstances where the instigator is vulnerable to negative aggression, and the reward expectations for such an act are positive. Under these conditions, the violent act is highly probable -- its intensity heightened by the viewing of

the media violence.

If we were to remove media violence from this scheme, some level of negative aggression would still be likely. The effect of the media-portrayed act is to increase the intensity of the response and, when the situation allows transfer, to shape the expression of the response. Available evidence indicates that the heightening effect can occur independently of shaping. The assumption is, however, that the greatest intensity would occur when the greatest transfer is possible.

If the viewer observes a parallel between the incident of televised violence and the provocation of aggression in his own environment, the observed violence assumes added importance as a contributor to an increase in viewer aggression. Moreover, if the target of violence shown on the screen has qualities or characteristics similar to the viewer's target of aggression, aggressive behavior becomes substantially more likely.

It is important to note that substantial evidence indicates that the heightening effect on subsequent aggressive behavior is not restricted to violent content alone. Research studies have shown that various kinds of content can increase the aggressive behavior of angered viewers. These content types include: Verbal violence (i.e., a heated argument), aggressive humor, sexually arousing content, and combination of sexually arousing and physically violent content. All of these content variables have been demonstrated as elicitors of viewer aggression, in combination with angered viewers and a suitable environment, which allows the viewer to aggress against the instigator without fear of reprisal or punishment.

This line of research strongly suggests that various types of media content -- aggressive and non-aggressive -- can successfully increase the likelihood and expression of subsequent aggression expressed by the viewer. These studies postulate that the individual can experience increases in physiological arousal of various emotional states,

and that the arousal increases augment the likelihood of viewer aggression. Any general increase in arousal effected by certain environmental stimuli -- aggressive or non-aggressive in nature -- will increase the organism's readiness to aggress.

One final comment is essential to understanding the increases in aggression brought on by observing TV and film violence. All of the media violence research documenting increases or decreases in aggressive behavior is based on differences between groups. But, even in the groups which show significant increases in aggression, not all individuals increase their respective levels of aggression -- regardless of the kind of violent content viewed. These results clearly point to the fact that not all viewers are affected by televised violence in the same way. Those individuals not predisposed to violence in dealing with interpersonal conflict clearly have reinforcement requirements that are quite different from those who have used violence successfully in the past. Thus, certain individuals will not be more likely to engage in aggressive behavior after viewing televised violence, due to different response and reinforcement histories. It is these individuals who may be relatively unaffected by media violence. There is, therefore, no necessary relationship between the viewing of media violence and the evocation of a violent response; considering the previous comment about content, the present conclusion must be that there is support for the position that any arousing content can have subsequent heightening effects, and that these effects may transfer to a variety of behaviors, not only negatively aggressive ones.

The occurrence, then, of violent behavior is mitigated by the necessity of the other variables. The individual must be motivated to negatively aggress; the aggressive response must be in his repertoire; the environmental condition must be such as to support the behaviors and the rein-

forcement probabilities must be perceived as positive.

Reduced Aggression

Reductions in aggressive behavior as a consequence of viewing television violence have been explained by an interpretation using the concept of catharsis. The concept of catharsis developed from classical Greek drama where it was used to describe the purging effect of good theatre. As applied in our present context, the interpretation suggests that angered viewers can vicarously drain pent-up hostility be viewing televised violence. By empathizing with the television character in an attack, the viewer experiences a reduction in hostility he had previously held toward a target in his environment. Thus, by observing aggression, the viewer is less likely to actually engage in violent behavior, because the motivation for such behavior has been reduced through fantasy.

The catharsis interpretation is exemplified by the following combination of conditions: 1) an angered viewer whose anger is aroused by a specific target; 2) the observation of violent content in which the viewer fantasizes that he is the attacker in the sequence, and that the victim or villain is the instigator; and 3) a fantasy that is adequate to satisfy the reinforcement contingencies of the viewer following arousal by the instigator. Under these conditions, when the opportunity to aggress against the instigator, becomes available, the viewer is less likely to aggress against the instigator, because his fantasy experience has served to reduce his hostilities. What is important, however, is that the individual must be satisfied with a fantasy attack vicariously experienced through the media, as compared to an opportunity to actually participate in aggression against the instigator.

The catharsis explanation represents only one of several possibilities which can account for decreased aggression. In another possibility, the aggressive response may be inhibited by media-portrayed violence which makes salient attitudes and/or value judgments inimical to violent behavior. Inhibition can be viewed as the opposite of catharsis. Catharsis allows for a release or vicarious expression of the aggressive motivation; inhibition, on the other hand, represses the motivation for violence -- disallowing its normal operation as an instigator of behavior. For example, inhibition can be said to be operating when the individual is reminded of his held value that it is wrong to be angry. Inhibition can also be said to be operating when the aggressive response itself is repressed, because of subsequent consequences beyond the immediate reduction of the motivation to aggress. A young boy, for example, may resist striking another because of subsequent parental wrath. Media violence which makes salient these long-term consequences can reduce aggression.

Finally, the likelihood of aggressive behavior can be decreased if the media-portrayed violence is presented in such a manner that the immediate results perceived by the viewer do not portend positive reinforcement for the violent act. If the TV character is not rewarded (positively reinforced), or is immediately punished for his act, the viewer may generalize the lack of reward or the punishment to his own situation. Consequently, the violent response will be lowered in the hierarchy of responses associated with the aggressive motivation, and some other response will become more likely. Note that neither the aggressive motivation nor the violent response is inhibited which involves the operation of counter-forces, but, rather, the response is reduced in its attractiveness, and, hence, is not evoked. In the first instance, a normally successful behavior is currently withheld because conditions do not permit

a successful outcome; in the second, a potential response without a history specific to the motivational and environmental conditions is rejected because it is perceived as non-rewarding in those conditions. The difference in the two circumstances is the previous history of the response for the viewer. This difference may appear slight. However, the effect on behavior can be substantial. Inhibited behavior is likely to occur given small changes in the environment, e.g., the removal of surveillance; rejected behavior, given the same changes, will remain low in the response hierarchy.

There are, then, four conditions under which reduced aggression might occur as a result of viewing media presented violence: 1) reduction due to catharsis, where the individual is satisfied with a vicarious expression of violence; 2) reduction due to inhibition of the motivational system, where the operation of the motivational system is blocked by competing systems; 3) reduction due to inhibition of the response, where the response itself is blocked due to consequences perceived likely; and 4) reduction due to the perceived unattractiveness of the response, where the viewer establishes an expectation of negative reinforcement, due to the manner of the media presentation.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Coming full circle to the question posed near the beginning of this article, "Does TV violence cause viewers to act violently?", it should be apparent at this point that such a question is meaningless because it implies an easy "yes" or "no" answer -- an answer that most parents and concerned citizens are continually seeking. The problem, then, centers on asking the right questions about the relationship between TV violence and viewer aggression. More appropriate questions to ask which were answered in the preceding discussion of media effects are as follows: Can TV

violence predispose children to violence? Can the viewing of TV violence lead to subsequent viewer aggression? Can children learn ways of behaving violently and successful uses of violence from watching violence on TV? The answer to all of these questions is "yes". Television violence can and does have these effects on some children on some occasions. The question which requires more definitive research is: How many of what types of children are adversely affected by viewing television violence? We know that the number affected is more than a mere handful, but clearly not all children. The proportion of the population of children remains to be determined. But, regardless of the exact figure, television violence seems to be doing far more harm than good.

Programming violence seems to be such a harmful waste of a powerful and omnipresent communication medium, because just as TV can teach violence, it has also demonstrated its potential to promote desirable behavior. For television not to serve as a purveyor of prosocial behavior is the saddest observation on the entire problem of television's effects on children.

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